

The Invention of Objectivity

Big media pundits are always wringing their hands about how upstart partisan bloggers are destroying the neutral objectivity our country was founded on. (If there's one thing pundits love to do, it's hand-wringing.) Without major papers giving everyone an objective view of the facts, they insist, the very foundation of the republic is in peril.

You can criticize this view for just being silly or wrong, and many have, but there's another problem with it: it's completely ahistorical. As Robert McChesney describes in *The Problem of the Media*, objectivity is a fairly recent invention — the republic was actually founded on partisan squabblers.

When our country was founded, newspapers were not neutral, non-partisan outlets, but the products of particular political parties. The Whigs had their paper, the Tories theirs, and both of which attacked their political opponents with slurs that would make even the most foul-mouthed bloggers blush. This behavior wasn't just permitted — it was encouraged.

You often hear the media quote Jefferson's comment that "were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." However, they hesitate to print the following sentence: "But I should mean that every man should receive those papers, and be capable of reading them." In particular, Jefferson was referring to the post office subsidy the government provided to the partisan press.

In 1794, newspapers made up 70% of post office traffic and the big debate in Congress was not over whether the government should pay for their delivery, but how much of it to pay for. James Madison attacked the idea that newspaper publishers should have to pay even a token fee to get the government to deliver their publications, calling it "an insidious forerunner of something worse." By 1832, newspaper traffic had risen to make up 90% of all mail.

Indeed, objectivity wasn't even invented until the 1900s. Before that, McChesney comments, "such notions for the press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable." Everyone assumed that the best system of news was one where everyone could say their piece at very little cost. (The analogy to blogging isn't much of a stretch, now is it? See, James Madison loved blogs!)

But as wealth began to concentrate in the Gilded Age and the commercial presses began to lobby government for more favorable policies, the size and power of the smaller presses began to dwindle. The commercial presses were eager to be the only game in town, but they realized that if they were, their blatant partisanship would have to go. (Nobody would stand for a one-newspaper town if the one paper was blatantly biased.) So they decided to insist that journalism was a profession like any other, that reporting was an apolitical job, based solely on objective standards.

They set up schools of journalism to train reporters in the new notion. In 1900, there were no J-schools; by 1920, the major ones were going strong. The "church and state" separation of advertising and reporting became official doctrine and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) was set up to enforce it.

The entire foundation of press criticism was rebuilt. Now, instead of criticizing papers for the bias of their owners, press critics had to focus on the professional obligations of their writers. Bias wasn't about the slant of a paper's focus, but about any slanting put in by a reporter.

So that was the line of attack the house press critics took when the world of weblogs brought back the vibrant political debates of our country's founding. "These guys are biased! Irresponsible! They get their facts wrong! They're unprofessional!" they squeal. Look, guys. Tell that to James Madison.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

October 19, 2006